

**National Indian Council on Aging (NICOA)
Advocacy Agenda
Presented at the “Listening Session”
Of the White House Conference on Aging
Washington, DC
By
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Good afternoon. My name is Bill Benson. I am a former Acting Assistant Secretary for Aging at the Administration on Aging. I have the pleasure of standing in today for Mr. Gary Kodaseet, Executive Director of the National Indian Council on Aging, or NICOA. I serve NICOA as the Technical Director for their Indian Health Service-funded National Technical Support Center for Tribal Long Term Care.

NICOA is the Albuquerque-based national organization that represents the interests of Indian and Alaska Native elders across this country. NICOA’s board of directors consists of elders representing different regions of the country who are elected by their peers. Just last week NICOA concluded its biennial conference which was attended by 1,600 Indian people, most of whom are elders.

DESPITE SOME ADVANCES IN THE PROVISION OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES DIRECTED TO AMERICAN SENIORS, TIMES ARE STILL VERY HARD FOR INDIAN ELDERS. THEIR HEALTH STATUS RANKS AMONG THE POOREST OF ANY MINORITY IN THE NATION. THEY ARE DISABLED AT RATES 50% HIGHER THAN OTHER AMERICAN ELDERLY.

NEARLY THREE OUT OF FIVE OF THEM LIVE BELOW 200% OF POVERTY. ONLY 66 PERCENT OF ELIGIBLE INDIANS ARE ACCESSING SOCIAL SECURITY, A RATE FAR LOWER THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE OF 88 PERCENT. AS THE DIABETES EPIDEMIC CONTINUES IN INDIAN COUNTRY, THE DISEASE AND ITS COMPLICATIONS AFFECT ELDERS MORE SEVERELY THAN ANY OTHER AGE GROUP. MORE THAN ONE OF EVERY FOUR NATIVE ELDERS HAVE DIABETES AND IN SOME COMMUNITIES, MORE THAN HALF OF THE ELDERS ARE AFFLICTED. AS THEY LIVE LONGER, THEY ARE ALSO LIVING WITH THE COMPLICATIONS AND DISABILITIES CAUSED BY THE DISEASE. MUCH MORE HELP IS NEEDED TO EDUCATE THEM ABOUT HOW TO PREVENT THE DISEASE . . . OR HOW TO LIVE WITH IT.

NOWHERE ARE THE DISPARITIES IN MINORITY HEALTH CARE SO GREAT . . . NOWHERE IS THE MANDATE TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SO COMPELLING, AS WITH THE WELL-BEING OF AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE ELDERS.

I am here to share with you today several key elements of NICOA’s agenda on behalf of Indian and Alaska Native elders.

- **Funding under Title VI of the Older Americans Act must be significantly increased - \$26.612 Million to \$100 Million. Less than half the nation's federally recognized tribes receive Title VI funding and for those that do, the funding is woefully inadequate.**

Since its inception in 1980, Title VI (Older Americans Act) funding has been so inadequate that reservation services have never been “comparable to those provided under Title III,” as the title mandates. [Title III, a state formula grant program funds a wide range of social services for the elderly; whereas Title VI is a comparable program dedicated to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians]. Nevertheless, this program currently serves 243 reservation projects and remains the cornerstone of Older American Act services to Indian elders.

While funding per project ranges from \$69,000 to \$168,000, approximately 50 percent of projects are at the \$69,000 level. This amount is intended to provide meals and other supportive services for a minimum of 50 elders for an entire year! Projects funded at the highest levels need to serve 1,500 or more elders! Further, with the aging of the population in Indian country, more tribes are qualifying for Title VI funding but cannot be served due to fund limitations.

Concurrently, funded projects are struggling with relentless increases in the cost of providing nutrition and other supportive services to their clientele. These conditions dictate that current funding of \$26.612 million is grossly inadequate and an incremental increase in funding to \$100 million is in order. These programs were cut in FY 2004 and FY 2005 when the number of elders served was increasing and prices for food and gasoline costs were rising.

- **When Title VII of the OAA – The Elder Rights Title – was created, a distinct program – Subpart B – was authorized in the hopes of bringing elder rights protections to Indian country. Not a single dollar has been appropriated for the Indian portion of Title VII. At minimum, \$1,000,000 in Elder Abuse Awareness and Protection Demonstration Grants need to be made available for Indian Country. NICOA recently completed an examination of the serious problem of elder abuse in Indian Communities under the AoA-funded National Center on Elder Abuse. We will make sure you receive a copy of the final report.**

Subtitle B of Title VII of the Older Americans Act authorizes a program for tribes, public agencies, or nonprofit organizations serving Indian elders to assist in prioritizing issues relating to elder rights and to carry out activities in support of these priorities. Funds have never been appropriated for this purpose.

While funds have been appropriated to states for similar purposes, these programs seldom reach Indian elders due to cultural, jurisdictional, and geographic barriers. Indian tribes have little or no access to the agencies, departments, ombudsman, or

other programs that are available to states. Further, tribes have no additional source of mandated federal funding for elder protection activities. Anecdotal evidence provided by those involved with elder services in Indian country suggests a high incidence of elder abuse in Indian country.

It is commonly acknowledged that “abusers” are often family members and that elders often do not realize they are being abused and if they do know, they are reluctant to disclose this information to the authorities.

Outreach and demonstration programs are needed to increase awareness of elder abuse and to help tribes devise ways to minimize abusive behavior. A demonstration grant program directed to Indian country in the amount of \$1,000,000 would begin to address this very serious issue. NICOA has just released this year a report on the issue of Elder Abuse in Indian Country.

- **Wages and skills are low and turnover is high among the tribes Title VI personnel. They are important to not only running their Title VI grants programs also ensuring that elders have access to needed social services. It is important that the current Title IV funding of \$750,000 continue for training to improve elders’ access to social services in Indian country.**

Title IV of the Older Americans Act, "Research and Demonstration Grants," provides important resources for improving access to social services and transferring health care information for many of the nation's seniors. The benefits of improved access, however, do not accrue to Indian country, where many of the nation's most geographically isolated and socio-economically deprived seniors live.

Elders in Indian country could best be provided access to essential social services and important health care information by strengthening the capacity of existing community-based programs to serve, advocate, inform, and intervene on their behalf. For Native American (American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian) elders, these important functions are best provided by locally managed Title VI programs.

In FY 2005 NICOA is proposing a pilot/demonstration project in the State of Washington to assist Title VI grantees to access social and other supportive services by training tribal members to serve as Benefits Counselors to provide assistance to American Indian elders. It is NICOA’s goal to implement a similar program nationwide if funding is available once the Washington demonstration project is completed and evaluated.

These (primarily Title VI) programs are established to provide nutrition and other supportive services to Native American elders throughout the United States. Title VI service providers not only have daily contact with elders but are often the elders’ only contact with human services providers.

While federal funding for substantive aspects of this program is extremely inadequate, funding to strengthen the capacity of these community-based organizations is practically nonexistent. A most glaring example is the 2003 appropriation of \$6.2 million for Native

American caregivers through the National Family Caregivers Support Program, which continues to operate—despite repeated requests from Indian elder advocates—without any provisions for training service providers to effectively provide these services. More than 100 Title VI providers struggle to operate these grant programs with little, if any federal direction and no technical assistance.

The NICOA Board of Directors supports continuation of the program to increase training for Title VI programs to improve elder Indian access to social services and an expansion of the program to a national level as warranted. This initiative includes but is not limited to the following objectives:

- **Training to improve Title VI program management and delivery;**
- **Title VI staff development to improve morale and retention;**
- **Training on information dissemination of health care, preventative medicine, illness-coping, and caregiving strategies;**
- **Training to improve elder access to social services at federal, state, and tribal levels;**
- **Training to assist Native American National Family Caregiver Support Program grantees.**

In the interest of time, allow me to quickly summarize several other of NICOA's other key agenda items:

- **Continuation of the current \$129,000 project to decrease the prevalence of health disparities by promoting health and wellness among American Indian elders in Indian country;**

The National Indian Council on Aging has been able to reach out to Indian country by attendance at the State Councils on Indian Aging in Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Wisconsin. The Executive Director and a NICOA board member from each area has been able to make presentations on the importance of maintaining good health and wellness through nutrition, exercise, smoking cessation and by encouraging regular visits and examinations by a doctor. Our work plan proposes to make presentations in all areas represented by our board members in the next two years. NICOA represents 12 areas in the lower 48 and Alaska.

The National Indian Council on Aging also serves as a resource to Indian tribes by providing literature on Health and Wellness issues. NICOA Monographs on Diabetes and other health issues are available and will be mailed upon request to Title VI grantees and Tribal Health directors. We have established a website at WWW.NICOA.ORG and have just concluded our biannual conference for Indian elders held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on August 28 –30, 2004. Approximately 1600 elders and providers attended the biannual event.

- **Serious attention must be given to ensuring that the recently enacted Medicare prescription drug benefits serve Indian beneficiaries and to ensure there is no negative effect on Indian elders Treaty Rights.**

Several resolutions passed at the Milwaukee conference concerned the Prescription Drug Benefit in Medicare. Tribes feel the requirement that Indian elders be required to possess a prescription drug card is another broken promise in the treaties made by the United States with Indian Tribes to provide them with free health benefits including prescriptions. What is the Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services planning as a response to this issue?